

The irrelevance of merit

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- [0 : 0 0] Matthew's Gospel, chapter 20, verses 1 to 16. For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard.
- After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And going out about the third hour, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.
- So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. And about the eleventh hour, he went out and found others standing, and he said to them, Why do you stand here idle all day?
- They said to him, Because no one has hired us. He said to them, You go into the vineyard too. And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the labourers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.
- And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more.
- [1 : 3 0] But each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it, they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.
- But he replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go.
- I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?
- So the last will be first, and the first last. Thus reads the Word of God. Let me pray as we begin.
- Our Father, we pray that the Lord Jesus Christ would be exalted this morning through the preaching of His Word and through the response of each of our hearts and lives.
- [2 : 3 8] For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. It seems to be some kind of a rule that all self-respecting schools and colleges should have a motto, preferably one in Latin or in Greek.
- My old school had the motto, Pomem ki Meruit Ferrat, which I believe means something like this, Let him who merits earn the palm or the prize.
- Let him who merits bear the palm, bear the prize. It's a good motto for a school in many ways because it teaches children early that the rewards of this life come to those who earn them, who merit them.
- And I have to say, my school was quite a good meritocracy. It modeled the principle really very well. Like many of the schools that some of us here attend or have attended, the children were placed in various sets according to ability and lots of different subjects.
- When I entered the school, I had to take a proficiency test in French and I scored 17%, I believe. So you may be able to guess which set they placed me in for French.

[3 : 50] Annual prize days recognized the achievements of pupils in academics, in sport, and in community life. The great offices of school prefect and school steward, as we called them, were given to those who were deemed most worthy.

Those who scored in the top 10% of the school academically got to wear an academic tie. And the very brightest and the best at graduation had their names inscribed in gold leaf on the paneled wall of the assembly room.

A great meritocracy. Those who merit earn the prize, earn the palm. It was good to learn that lesson early because in most spheres of life that is the way the world works.

Well, reward according to merit may well be how this world works. But in the parable we've just read from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus sets out to show us that in the kingdom of heaven things do not work according to that basis.

This world may be a meritocracy, but the kingdom of heaven is nothing of the kind. We're in the middle as Rupert mentioned of a mini-series in Matthew chapters 19 and 20 where Jesus is teaching us in a variety of ways that the kingdom of heaven doesn't function in the same way that this world functions.

[5 : 18] We've called the series Turning the World Upside Down because that's what Jesus says and shows us he will do when his kingdom arrives in its fullness. When all is said and done, when world history is brought to a close, when the Lord Jesus returns, we're to know that some of our expectations will be turned on their head.

In his kingdom, an otherworldly set of values operates and rules. It's important for us to learn kingdom values so that we'll be prepared for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ one day.

But it's also important for us to understand the values of the kingdom for our lives today. As the church of God, as the people of God here on earth, we are to model and to live by kingdom values even now as we await the final revealing of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

And so the lessons we're going to learn this morning from this parable here in Matthew 20 should shape both our expectations for the future and our attitudes in the present.

Last week, with Rupert's help, we looked at the encounter between Jesus and the rich man who came to him asking, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

[6 : 41] Knowing that this man loved his money more than anything else, Jesus said, put that aside and follow me. Make me your everything and you will have eternal life and treasure in heaven.

But we saw that the man was unwilling to do that. Jesus' disciple Peter then piped up, having been listening in, chapter 19 and verse 27, see we've left everything and have followed you.

What then will we have? It's not an entirely unreasonable question. Jesus has just promised the rich young man that he would have treasure in heaven, verse 21, if he set aside his idol of wealth and made Jesus his everything.

So Jesus answers Peter, verse 28, truly I say to you, in the new world when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

That's something special for the apostles, but now something for all disciples. And everyone who has left houses, or brothers, or sister, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

[8 : 01] As we saw last week, when we looked at that encounter together, Jesus is saying there that God will be no man's getter at the final accounting. What might seem like sacrifices for the Lord Jesus now will be shown to be nothing of the kind in the kingdom?

No follower of Jesus ultimately misses out on anything good by following him. Well, that settles Peter's initial question about missing out, but it raises another one for us.

And we can just imagine the possible train of thought going through the disciples' minds at this particular point. I'm glad to hear that I'm not going to miss out on anything by following the Lord Jesus.

I'm glad to hear that my sacrifices for him will not be forgotten. That's very reassuring. But just to be clear, just so I'm understanding you are right, does that mean that God is keeping a tally of everyone's service and planning to repay each one of us according to how much we've sacrificed, how much we've served, how long we've followed, how many disciples we've made.

If that's right, if that's what Jesus is saying, then I wonder where I come in the pecking order. I wonder what reward I'll receive. Well, before that particular train of thought is allowed to continue too far, Jesus steps in and tells the parable that we read, chapter 20, verses 1 to 16, the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

[9 : 38] The story is simple enough. An owner of a vineyard is in need of some extra help. Perhaps it's the end of the season and it's time to harvest the grapes and it's all hands on deck.

So first thing in the morning, he goes to the local village and heads into the marketplace early in the morning, probably around 6 a.m. He looks around seeing if there's some casual workers looking for employment that day and sure enough, there were.

He finds a group of willing workers and says to them, come work for me, I'll pay you the going rate, a denarius for the day. And so off they go. But soon enough, three hours later, the landowner finds he needs more workers to get the work done.

So he returns to the village, to the marketplace, and he finds some more laborers waiting for employment. And he promises, verse 4, to pay them whatever is right, presumably the appropriate fraction of a denarius for what's left of the day.

He then does the same thing at noon and at 3 and at 5 p.m. It might seem like poor labor planning, but it's not a totally unusual story.

[10 : 52] It's not that remarkable yet. It's only at verse 8 that things depart from the ordinary and we discover that this particular landowner is quite extraordinary.

Verse 8, And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.

Consider two imaginary farm laborers. We'll call them Ned and Fred. As they did each morning, Ned and Fred both woke up early and headed into the village and into the marketplace, hoping to find work that they might feed their family.

When the landowner came along at 6 a.m. into the marketplace, he beckoned Ned to join him, but Fred wasn't in the first pick. As it turned out, Fred wasn't in the second batch either, nor the third, nor the fourth.

Fred waited patiently all day, hoping that he might find employment. And as the end of the workday approached, as 5 p.m. neared, he was bracing himself for heading home once again with an empty wallet to face a hungry family.

[12 : 06] He lingered in the village center really a bit longer than made any sense. No one would be looking for workers so late in the day. It was almost quitting time. But at 5 o'clock, when the landowner returned yet one more time, he called out to Ned and to a few others sitting there, end of verse 6, Why do you stand there idle all day?

Well, they said to him, Because no one's hired us. He said to them, You go into the vineyards too. So off went Fred with the others, doubtless relieved, if a little bit surprised.

Now, at the very end of the day, at pay time, Fred is called up before Ned to receive his pay. Ned doesn't mind, actually. He thinks he understands what's going on.

Fred isn't going to be paid very much. And it'll be a bit embarrassing if he's still around when Ned gets his whole denarius. Makes perfect sense. Let him get out of the way. We'll save embarrassment.

So he watches Fred walk over to the foreman's table, verse 9, and he sees him receive a denarius. Odd, thinks Ned, a full denarius for just a couple of hours' work.

[13 : 16] Maybe the master of this vineyard has actually upped his rates and just hasn't announced it. And he does a quick calculation in the back of his mind and thinks, well, that means I'll be in for five denarii today.

I think I'll take the wife and children out for supper at Pizza Express to celebrate. I hope, I do hope Fred won't be too jealous when he discovers what's happened.

It was odd that the latecomers should be paid first, but the much bigger surprise comes in verse 10. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius.

Visions of a family celebration at Pizza Express soon faded from Ned's mind, and a deepening sense of indignancy soon turned to anger.

Verse 11, and on receiving it, they grumbled at the master of the house, saying, these last worked only one hour, and yet you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.

[14 : 23] These workers are clearly not the heroes of the story. They're not placed here that we might imitate them. Their attitude here is not a model for us, but on one level, I think we can at least understand how they're feeling at the moment.

If when it comes to payday in your office next month up in town, you're standing around the water cooler as your colleagues open their pay slips, and you just happen to glance over a shoulder, and notice that your friend, who's at the same pay grade as you, same level of seniority, is actually getting five times your hourly rate.

Well, you might be slightly put out, to say the least. On one level, we get it. According to the principles of economics and fairness that are meant to govern our world, the situation doesn't seem to make much sense.

It actually feels rather unfair. But what's Jesus wanting to show us here? What's wrong with the complaint of these workers? What's the unhealthy attitude of heart that Jesus wants to pinpoint?

And more than that, what are we to learn from the Master's reply? As we stand back to consider this story and its implications for us, we're simply going to take those two in turn.

[15 : 40] We'll consider first the worker's worldly complaint and we'll consider next the Master's gracious reply. First then, a worldly complaint.

To discern what's wrong with the worker's complaint here, we need to look again at the broader context of this parable within Matthew's Gospel, what came before and what will come after.

Remember what's just come before. Jesus promised the rich young man that he would have treasure in heaven, chapter 19 and verse 21, if he would set aside that idol of wealth and make Jesus his everything.

The disciples heard this, their ears perked up, and Peter said, verse 27, see we've left everything to follow you, what then will we have? The disciples reckon they've made some serious sacrifices to follow the Lord Jesus.

They've left family and jobs, comfort and home. They've embraced social embarrassment and economic uncertainty. What can they expect in the life to come?

[16 : 44] The very same attitude is evident in the incident that follows our parable as well. Chapter 20 and verse 20, do look with me. Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee, two disciples of Jesus, came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked him to do something.

And he said to her, what do you want? She said to him, say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right and one at your left, in your kingdom.

My boys have been with you since the beginning. They've given up good careers. They've followed you all over the countryside. It's been costly. It's been painful at times.

Surely they deserve something special at the end. What's in it for them? The workers of chapter 20, verse 10, those hired first, those who, verse 12, have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat, they represent those followers of Jesus who think that because they've been in it the longest, because they've made sacrifices and invested heavily in the kingdom, they should be at the front of the queue at heaven's door.

They should have a seat of honor. They should have a greater reward. It seems that Peter had something of that attitude back in chapter 19. It's pretty certain that the mother of the sons of Zebedee had it for her boys in chapter 20.

[18 : 10] And I just wonder if we're in danger of sharing it too. It's easy to read this parable and tut-tut the grumbly attitude of these workers.

It's easy for us to criticize Peter. It's easy to pour scorn on the mother of the sons of Zebedee. But I wonder if we ever here at Grace Church Dulwich find ourselves running a bit of a kingdom pecking order in our heads.

I wonder if we ever imagine, though we'd never say it out loud and perhaps we'd never even articulate it to ourselves, I wonder if we ever imagine that certain people will deserve to be at the front of the queue at heaven's gate, will be due honor at prize day, will have a natural right, to front row seats in the heavenly throne room.

In our imaginary role of honor, I wonder who would be the front runners. Perhaps it's those who give most. Perhaps it's those who are known for their evangelistic endeavors.

Those who always bring a friend to jam or to guest services. Those who serve on every rota. Those who lead groups. Those who come to every event in the church diary.

[19 : 28] Those who have never missed a prayer meeting. Those who not only have never missed a prayer meeting but always pray out loud at a prayer meeting. Maybe those who have been around the longest.

The original core group who made the pilgrimage down from the city in those early days. Perhaps it's those who come from particular Christian families or who were converted or disciplined through particular summer camps.

We could go on and on but the reality is that the habit of our world to run pecking orders of merit is deeply ingrained in our thinking and it's hard to shake it off.

It's so deeply ingrained that we instinctively go around applying the principle to the life of the church. And we do so, I think, without even recognizing that we're doing it.

And we assume, even if we wouldn't say it out loud and even if we wouldn't articulate it in our own hearts and minds, we assume instinctively that God shares our perspective and should one day confirm it.

[20 : 36] I noticed the other day that a student of mine up at the Cornhill course at London Bridge was wearing a very nice watch, an antique watch. I hadn't seen it before and I knew him pretty well so I thought I'd ask him about it.

He took the watch off and handed it to me to have a look at it. I could see that it was a nice watch, clearly pretty old and in beautiful condition. I turned it over and there was some engraving on the back.

The watch said that it had been given to this friend's grandfather to mark 25 years of loyal service in his company. My friend told me a bit of the background and the story.

His grandfather had grown up in poverty and had joined this company as a young man right at the bottom and had worked his way up and stayed there for his whole working life and reached a position of some seniority.

This particular watch was given to mark 25 years. My friend also said he has at home the watch that marks 40 years, an even nicer one and much more valuable.

[21 : 38] A nice watch for 25 years, a really nice watch for 40 years, fitting rewards for years of service. It's a good principle for companies to reward loyal employees according to their service.

It's appropriate in the world of work. But Jesus wants us to know here in this parable that God is bound to no such expectation.

He is, of course, free to reward his servants as he chooses, but he is never obliged to do so. The principle of reward for meritorious service does not govern God's dealings with his people in the kingdom of heaven.

Let him who merits bear the prize or the palm. Well, it's okay for a school, but it's not the motto of the kingdom. To see that, we turn now to the master's gracious reply.

Verse 13. But he, the master, replied to one of them, Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go.

[22 : 47] I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to choose, to do with what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?

The master's reply is gracious and I think it contains a clear rebuke, but it begins with a kindly opener. Friend, the master is patient with this worker and his misunderstanding, but he wants to be unmistakably clear that it is a misunderstanding and a serious one at that.

The worker thinks that this master, this owner of this vineyard, is working according to worldly principles of business and of economics. But the master's message to him is that he is, in fact, operating on the very unworldly principle of lavish generosity.

For those with eyes to see it, the master's heart of generosity has actually been evident for some time and it's been repeatedly confirmed throughout the day. As he returned to find unemployed workers time and time again at the third hour, at the sixth hour, at the ninth hour, and even at the eleventh hour, it became increasingly clear that the master was employing these workers less for his own benefit and more for theirs.

In an age with no social security net, no welfare system, those who did not work did not eat and nor did their families. The grumpy workers of verse 12 can't get out of their heads the idea that the master is operating a business.

[24 : 28] Surely he should be running things according to the strict rules of economics, of work, and of fair remuneration. But they've misread the situation and they've misread him as well.

Of course he'll not shortchange anyone, verse 13. I'm doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? There's no breach of contract, no injustice here. But the master has chosen, verse 14, to show generosity.

And is he not allowed, verse 15, to do what he will with those things that belong to him? The master works on the principle of lavish generosity, not simple economics, not strict merit.

And so, verse 16, the coming of the kingdom will bring surprises and reversals of what we might expect. The last will be first and the first last.

Not only does the latecomer get paid first, but he gets the same pay as the one who worked all day. A surprising reversal. Outrageous generosity.

[25 : 36] But why is this so? Why, verse 1, is the kingdom of heaven like this? It's so upside down and backwards. Is there a reason for it being like this?

Is there, if you like, a method to the madness? Yes. It's worth pursuing that question for a moment. And the answer is actually not long in coming.

Do you notice what follows our passage in the immediately following verses in chapter 20? The very next verses tell us why the kingdom is like this. In verse 17, we leave aside the world of the parable and return to present reality.

And we read this, verse 17. And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the 12 disciples aside. And on the way, he said to them, see, we're going up to Jerusalem.

And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified.

[26 : 38] And he will be raised on the third day. Why are things upside down and backwards in the kingdom of heaven? Why are these great reversals in God's kingdom?

How can it be that everywhere things run on merit in our experience? But in the kingdom of heaven, God's generosity is the rule.

In the end, the answer to the puzzle is really very simple. It's because Jesus, verse 17, went up to Jerusalem. It's because he, verse 18, was delivered up and condemned to death.

It's because he, verse 19, was flogged and crucified. And it's because he was raised to life again on the third day. I said before that God's kingdom doesn't operate on merit.

And that's entirely true as far as you and I are concerned. But of course, on another level, God's kingdom does actually operate on merit.

[27 : 46] But it's not my merit and it's not yours. God demands moral perfection and pure devotion to him. That's his standard. That's what Jesus told the rich young man in chapter 19.

And none of us has given him that. None of us can. But here's the thing. Jesus did. He lived a life of pure devotion and perfect obedience.

And he merits all the blessings of the eternal kingdom. Jesus is worthy of eternal life. And the amazing truth at the heart of the Christian gospel is that Jesus, the worthy and the righteous son, died in my place and in your place to bear the penalty for our rebellion and our failure to love God as we should.

He died in our place that we might be welcomed into his eternal kingdom on the basis not of what we deserve, but on the basis of his sheer kindness, his extraordinary generosity.

Seen in that light, the attitude of the workers in verse 11 is all the more unworthy. And seen in that light, our often worldly outlook and frequent self-concern, if we're honest, are all the more out of place.

[29 : 11] The attitude of heart that imagines that I can somehow place God in my debt through my service of him and that I have somehow climbed his pecking order of merit, that I have somehow earned a place on his role of honor, that I am somehow due preferment in his eternal kingdom, it's an attitude of heart that betrays the fact that I've lost sight of his generosity to me.

It demonstrates that I have forgotten that my place in the kingdom is a gift bought at great cost. If I ever find myself looking down on other believers, thinking that they're somehow second-class citizens of the kingdom because they've done less or given less or served less or evangelized less or been around less time than me, then I am, verse 15, begrudging them the Lord's generosity, that very same generosity that I have so wonderfully received.

There's a word of rebuke here, I think, for any of us individually who would ever feel superior because of our service or our giving or our length of commitment.

There's a word of rebuke here for us, I think, as a whole church. Whenever we allow any sense of pecking order to creep in, thinking that some stand above others in the kingdom because of the character or length or duration of their commitment, the super-invited, the super-givers, the super-leaders, the super-servers, the Lord Jesus won't have any of it.

And I think there's a great word of encouragement here as well for those of us who might think that we're actually at the bottom of the pecking order. Perhaps you feel guilty sometimes because you never managed to bring anyone to evangelistic events because perhaps you don't have the financial resources to give as others might give.

[31 : 12] Perhaps you feel less valuable because your time to serve in formal ways is squeezed more than that of others. Perhaps you feel unworthy because you don't have the same gifts of teaching or of music or of hospitality that others have.

Perhaps you feel a second-class citizen in some way because you're newer to Christian things. Well, if you're ever tempted to feel like that, just notice the attitude of the master we serve.

He insists, verse 8, that the latecomers be rewarded first. He insists, verse 9, that those who have contributed least receive no less than those who have contributed much.

He delights, verse 15, in giving his gifts freely and generously to those whom he chooses. He insists that in the final accounting, when all is said and done, verse 16, the last will be first.

If you feel that you are the last in the kingdom of heaven, the least fruitful, the least productive, the least worthy, delight this morning with me in the truth that Jesus loves to reverse the order of our expectations.

[32 : 21] your status and mine in the kingdom is based entirely on his gracious generosity and not on our merit. It's worth saying as well as we close that if you're not a Christian, and I don't know if that's anyone here, and you've perhaps always assumed that the kingdom of God is all about labor, all about merit, all about earning, and perhaps you thought, well, I'll never make the cut, I'll never make the grade, I'll never be worthy.

If that's you, please see the implications of this parable for you. This master and this king admits people to his kingdom because of his generosity and not because of their contribution and not because of their merit.

Jesus has paid the price at the cross for your entry and for mine. And life in the kingdom is a gift he delights to give to all who will willingly receive it.

Well, what a master to serve and what a king to belong to. Let's pray as we finish. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me or do you begrudge my generosity?

God, our Father, we thank you for your extraordinary generosity to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that our thinking about ourselves and our thinking about others would be shaped entirely by this immense generosity.

[34 : 02] For the sake of the Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen.